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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the kind of environment that nurtures emerging literacy in a consistent and comprehensive way from infancy through kindergarten. The paper also examines the rationale for encouraging young children to communicate and become authors. A section on opportunities for literacy development covers writing centers, show me activities, sustained silent writing, the making of a field trip book, and the making of other sorts of books. Over 60 references are cited. (RH)

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Beginning at the Beginning: Literacy Development from Infancy through Kindergarten

A Preconference Session
National Association for the Education of Young Children
November 2, 1989
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the environment that nurtures emerging literacy in a consistent and comprehensive way from infancy through kindergarten. It will also examine the rationale for encouraging young children to communicate and become authors in meaningful and appropriate experiences. Specific suggestions and activities are included to enhance literacy development in programs that serve infants, toddlers and young children.

Beginning at the Beginning

In the last decade many changes have occurred in our understanding of early literacy development. For many years it was thought that infants and toddlers learned to speak and listen and, at five or six when they entered school, they would learn to read and write. A growing number of studies of emerging literacy have clearly indicated that language abilities are interrelated and that the process is begun in infancy and is expanding for many years (Chomsky, 1972; Clay, 1975; Harste, Short & Burke, 1988; Halliday, 1975; Loban, 1976; Vukelich & Golden, 1982).

The examination of the environment that was found to promote language can also be helpful as literacy is nutured (Durkin, 1976; Goodman, 1980; Teale, 1978). The young infant and toddler learn about language as they are involved in social interactions with many opportunities to send and receive responses. The responsive environment continues to be essential for kindergarten children as they interact with their teacher and peers on a meaningful project or participate in socio-dramatic centers.

Infants, toddlers and young children learn best when they are actively involved in an experience and have an opportunity to select and control the experience (Biber, 1977; Lamme, 1987; Piaget, 1974). The literary environment must also focus on active participation in meaningful experiences in the real world. These concrete experiences assist young children as they understand words and writing takes on meaning.

Literature provides many opportunites for infants and kindergarten children to have language models that enrich their vocabulary and provide positive experiences with books. These very early experiences with books in infancy and the later exposure to more advanced content in the preschool and kindergarten years will provide encouragement for voluntary reading by children (Lamme, 1981; Morrow, 1989; Teale, 1984).

Although it was once assumed that young children learned to read before writing could be taught, it is now understood that the two are interrelated and develop concurrently. As oral language, listening, reading and writing develop, each enhances the development of the other. As toddlers scribble on paper they talk about their writing and relay the message it conveys. Later the kindergartener creates letters and patterns to record their ideas and read to the teacher about their experiences.

Our new understanding of the literacy process necessitates that we rethink our language environment for children in the first five years of their life. Rather than segmenting the curriculum into isolated areas and teaching skills in vocabulary, reading and writing we must immerse the infant, toddler, preschooler and kindergartener in a language rich environment that is filled with many opportunities to actively use language, to "read " books and record their ideas in their own way.

Characteristics of literacy development:

1. Very young children have a natural curiosity about literacy.
2. Young children have a general conception of the purpose and nature of print.
3. Young children understand that oral language, writing and reading are interrelated and develop concurrently.
4. Young children strengthen their acquisition of literacy through active hands-on experiences and concrete learning.
5. Young children progress at their own rate as they test, select and refine their ideas about literacy.
6. Young children profit from interaction with role models presenting talking, reading and writing as interrelated parts of the whole literacy process.
7. Young children acquire literacy skills through quantity and quality of literacy events.

Beginning with scribbling

The current research in emergent literacy indicates the need for educators to take advantage of children's concepts about print and their early experiences with writing. Children's pre-writing reflects a consistency long before they write in the conventional manner (Ferrerio & Teberosky, 1982).

When does writing actually begin? The preparation begins in infancy. When interacting with an infant through talking, singing, reading, and listening, the interrelatedness of the areas of communication are being provided. It has been suggested that reading and writing begin as play activities. At a very young age children can classify graphic productions as writing or non-writing (Lavine, 1973).

Why is it important to provide toddlers opportunities for scribbling? Writing begins as scribbles. Durrell (1976), a pioneer in the area of reading, has stated that a child's first urge is to write, not read. Provided with a variety of paper and washable markers, toddlers appear to enjoy scribbling. Research studies have found that making marks on paper is intrinsically satisfying for young children as young as two years of age (Gibson & Yonas, 1968). Scribbling on paper is a powerful activity for toddlers for they enjoy directing their learning and controlling the manipulation of the tool. These marks on paper are motivational for them. In addition, children in this stage recognize the connection between reading and writing. They read their scribbling, knowing it carries a message and conveys meaning (Holmes, 1989). Implications are that

providing opportunities for toddlers to scribble is significant in the development of literacy.

Finally, young children need to be provided with writing role models. It is helpful for children to see significant people in their environment, writing. In addition, it is important for adults to not only write for children, but concurrently with them, modeling the craft of writing (Holmes, 1989). Children who are provided writing time with a writing role model produce a greater variety of graphic productions. It has been suggested that young children's writing depends on available materials and models (Graves, 1978). The writing role model presents reading, writing, and drawing as interrelated parts of the whole process of communication. Children should be encouraged to "read" what they have written. Consequently, children perceive writing as functional and communicative as opposed to mere penmanship, correct letter formation, and punctuation.

Designating a writing area or setting up a writing center is one way of providing children opportunities for pre-writing and writing. This area should be intergrated with other daily activities of talking, singing, dancing, acting, and painting. Far too often, children experience writing as a passive pen and paper activity. Writing should not be separated from having fun but rather integrated throughout the day.

As children progress from scribbling to writing approximations, invented spelling should be encouraged. Holbrook (1965) stated that children are so terrified of putting words down wrong that they do not put anything down. Consequently, young children should be permitted to use invented spelling. As they mature in literacy development they will make the transition to more refined spelling. Just as toddlers crawl and walk before they run, so is invented spelling a precursor to more refined spelling and writing. Children who have had positive experiences with writing, write.

Scribbling is the beginning of writing. Thus, it is important to capitalize on a child's first urge of making marks on paper.

It all begins in infancy: The literacy connection

Infancy is the beginning--the very origin of numerous aspects of life that will continue to affect individuals each day of their life. Infants see and hear new things the moment they are born; they become mobile and they begin to communicate needs and desires. Infants grow and change each day as they learn. In order for today's infants and toddlers to become part of the literate society, early childhood educators and caregivers should nurture literacy in developmentally appropriate ways during these first years.

Talking with infants and toddlers is one of the best ways to facilitate language learning in very young children (Halliday,1973; Wells, 1985). In caring for the infants' daily needs and routines, caregivers can use language to describe, to share information about, to explain, and to uncover the world and environment in which they live. Talking as well as listening to infant vocalizations and early attempts at speech encourages the two-way communication skills that will continue throughout their lives.

Reading to children has been found to significantly contribute to later reading achievement and success in school (Strickland, 1987; Wells, 1985). It also provides ways to spend intimate and cuddling moments with infants while sharing a book. Sharing literature increases interest in reading books and stimulates literacy development.

Infants and toddlers find using writing tools exciting and stimulating. Allowing "pre-writing" opportunities can help them better understand the message communicated in writing. Adult role models relate what writing says to facilitate the connections between written language and spoken words.

Reading, writing, listening and using language are integrated components of literacy. Since these abilities do not simply appear in kindergarten or the early elementary years, it is important to provide a nurturing environment during the infant/toddler period.

More than ABC's: Linking words to experiences in the Kindergarten.

"Learning to read and write is a process of experiencing language." (Newman, 1984) As children's language and communication skills develop, their storytelling, art work, and writing begins to blossom. As children develop these abilities, they need opportunities for "experiencing language" by becoming authors and illustrators of their own publications.

Through the production and publication of their own written creations, children acquire basic academic skills required in kindergarten. Developmental areas such as social, physical, emotional, and academic are strenghtened through personal writings. Intergrating curricular areas such as reading, writing, math, science, music, health, social studies, and cooking can be enhanced by allowing children to publish books in the classroom. To expand a child's ability to become an author, illustrator and publisher in the classroom, teachers can:

1. Read to the children daily.
2. Provide a time to examine books and explore their contents.
3. Discuss and label the parts of a book: cover, spine, page numbers, title page, publisher, author, illustrator, and copyright.

4. Arrange the room in centers such as housekeeping, science, sociodramatic, art, games, listening, math, small and large blocks, computer, woodworking, etc. Include writing tools, books and other materials in each to offer a variety of opportunities in literacy.
5. Provide a workable area for the children to make and write books such as the book writing center. Include in this book writing center: paper, typewriter, dictionary, alphabet stamps, word box, markers, pens, calendar and blank books.
6. Provide teacher demonstrations of writing such as labeling, language experience charts, stories and book making.

Incorporating these suggestions allows the children to write and read books that belong to them. This personal ownership encourages a positive view of themselves as authors.

The literature connection across the early years: Books are for more than eating.

"People are not literate because they can read, they are literate because they do read." (Sutton, 1986) Exposing children to quality books and helping them develop the ability to respond to the books they read is one of the best ways of ensuring that children will want to read on their own and will continue to develop their responsiveness to books in more sophisticated ways. Providing a good balance between children's developmental characteristics and the books you read to them engages their interest. Providing ways of responding to books that also match their developmental characteristics, strengthens the literacy connection for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Infants and toddlers are expanding their sensory development at a rapid rate and need books with "listenability" and quality visual content. They also need durable, washable books to be able to explore and experiment with them. Due to their limited attention span and egocentric nature, the best choice of books would be simple ones with short content that relates to the immediate environment.

As the very young child's language begins to emerge, books that encourage labeling and conversation are useful to enhance this foundation of literacy for the future. Infants and toddlers are also beginning to learn about trust in others and need books that show love and affection among characters. In addition, books that describe daily routines should be shared. The toddler who is developing a sense of independence needs books that encourage self-help skills.

Preschool and kindergarten age children are experiencing rapid language development and need books with rhymes and repetitions. These

children are full of energy and need books that are completed in one sitting. Books that encourage active participation provide longer focus on the literary content.

Preschoolers and kindergarteners are oriented to themselves and their own interests therefore, they need books that relate to experiences and characters with which they can easily identify. These everyday experiences can be enhanced by books that build and extend emerging concepts, that develop a sense of time, and that provide reassurance and help establish routines. These children have active imaginations and need books that personify toys and animals. They are also beginning to develop moral judgements and need books that show characters with initiative, books with happy endings, and books where the positive and "good" wins.

Suggested lists for children's books:

Herne, B. (1981). Choosing books. New York: Laurel Books.

Huck, C., Hepler, S., & Hickman, J. (1987). Children's literature in the elementary school. (4th Ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Lamme, L., Cox, V., Mantanzo, J. & Olson, M. (1980). Raising readers. New York: Walker & Co.

Trelease, J. (1986). The read-aloud handbook. New York: Penguin.

Ideas for sharing books:

Jalongo, M. (1988). Young children and picture books. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

MacDonald, M. (1988). Booksharing. Hamden, CT: Library Professional Publication.

Raines, S. & Canady, R. (1989). Story stretchers. Mt. Rainier, ML.: Gryphon House.

Thomas, R. (1989). Primaryplots. New York: R.R. Bowker.

Recommended journals with book reviews:

School Library Journal
Horn Book
Booklist
Childhood Education
Young Children
The Reading Teacher
Language Arts
The Advocate

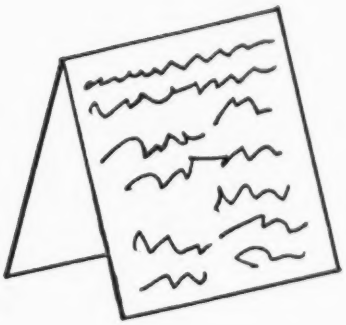
Conclusion

In six years an infant moves from a nonverbal communicator to a fluent articulate speaker. They can also be transformed from being unable to read and write to young children filled with a desire to communicate their ideas in written form with a positive view of themselves as authors. They can become young children who value literacy and choose to interact with books frequently. The early environment can nuture emerging literacy by careful planning and following the unique abilities and interests of this special group of children. Emersing young children in a rich literate environment provides experiences that help them understand the meaning and usefulness of words.

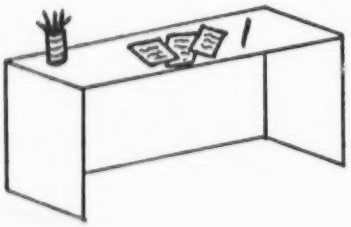
OPPORTUNITIES FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

WRITING CENTERS

Objective: To provide opportunities for pre-writing/writing.
To encourage the very young author. (Holmes, J. & Anderson-Fields, K., 1989)



easel writing



publisher's desk

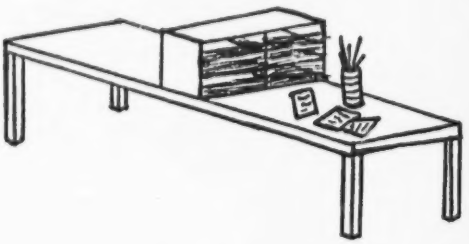


table centers

SHOW ME

OBJECTIVE: To make a relationship between pictures/words in a book and real objects.

MATERIALS NEEDED: A book (e.g. Playing; I Can; I See; I Touch, all by Helen Oxenbury) and representations of each item or a real example of each item.

PROCEDURE: While sharing the book with the baby, show him/her the real object. After several experiences with the book, ask him/her to show you the real object. (Dugger, 1989)

SUSTAINED SILENT WRITING

A special time period (five to ten minutes) is established as a time for all persons to pre-write/write. The children are provided opportunities for independent prewriting/writing time while exposed to writing role models, the adults in the environment who are also writing. (Holmes, J. & Anderson-Fields, K., 1989)

FIELD TRIP BOOK

OBJECTIVE: To encourage pre-reading skills. To provide a book that is meaningful and relevant to the children's experiences at the center.

MATERIALS NEEDED: Photographs of specific places in and around the center; book covers; book labels.

PROCEDURE: The teacher will take pictures of particular places in and around the center (e.g. library, playground, classroom, Mini-Dome, etc.). The pictures will need to have specific meaning and relevence to the children's experiences during the time they spend at the center. The pictures will be appropriately identified and will include a statement about what happens at each place. The pictures will then be compiled into a book labeled "Our Field Trip Book". The teachers will use the book with the children as well as encourage them to use it with each other and by themselves. NOTE: Variations of this idea could include: "My Friends at School"; "What We Do At My School", etc. (Dugger, 1989)

MAKING BOOKS

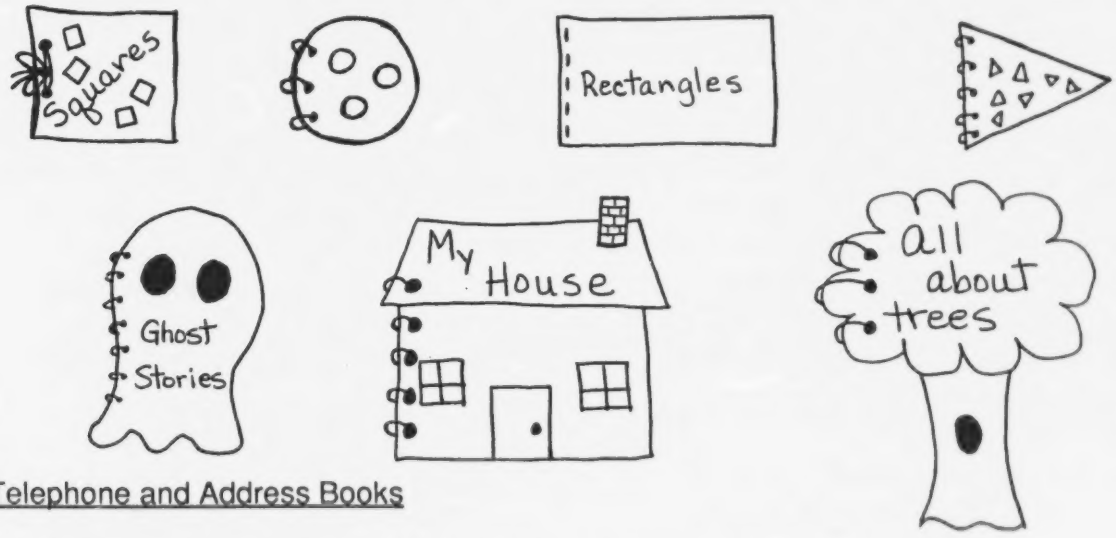
OBJECTIVES: To develop an understanding of pre-reading and pre-math skills. To promote a love for books. To develop fine-motor skills such as cutting, pasting, drawing, and writing by making, authoring and illustrating a book.

NOTE: Before books are used to teach academic skills, the children should be allowed to experiment with writing and illustrating their own books (i.e. a child-directed activity).

Shape Books

Make a book for each of the shapes (i.e. triangle, rectangle, circle, square)

with pre-cut blank pages that correspond to that shape. Keep in the book center and have the children add pictures to the book of objects in their environment that are like that shape. (Peters, 1989)



Telephone and Address Books

Children copy their phone number or address and draw a self-portrait on an individual page. The pages are then combined into a class phone or address book to keep in the room or to xerox and send home with each child. (Peters, 1989)

Texture Books

Place a textured piece of an object on each page. The child draws around the object to create a picture (Ex. A piece of sandpaper has a camel and a catus added to the page). (Peters, 1989)

Cookbooks

Keep an individual book for each child that is their personal cookbook. They should draw pictures of the food that they prepare in class and may include the recipe also. Variations can include illustrations of the utensils and ingredients used, or the reactions of the class after tasting the finished product. (Peters, 1989)

I Can Do It Book

This book helps to keep track of the motor skills each child has accomplished. Have the children draw pictures of themselves doing each task such as hopping, jumping, standing on one foot or walking on a balance beam. (Peters, 1989)

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